Teaching Communication Ethics: Praxis of Mindfulness and Dialogue, driven by the Notion of Serendipidity

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Abstract
Teaching ethics to undergraduate students is usually challenging if one’s goals are to help students relate ethics to real life and to assist them to be able to respect and respond to others whose worldviews are different from their own. This proposed ethics-centered pedagogy grounded in the theories of dialogue and mindfulness creates a classroom environment that promotes and facilitates students’ understanding that there are diverse ways of approaching morality and interacting in our contemporary world. Correspondingly, the underlying philosophy and orientation of this proposed pedagogy can also be adapted and used to teach other subjects where students need to learn and understand through discovering other ways of looking at and using the subject material. This proposed pedagogy has been developed from the experience of teaching ethics to students who live on the U.S–Mexico border where one can feel the some of the tensionality inherent in the difference between US-Mexican values and traditions.

Teaching ethics to undergraduate students is usually challenging if one’s goals are to help students relate ethics to real life and to assist them to be able to respect and respond to others whose worldviews are different from their own. With these goals in mind, the purpose of this paper is to promote an ethics-centered pedagogy grounded in the theories of dialogue and mindfulness so that communication ethics can be understood as living choices in real life. The goal is to create a classroom environment that promotes and facilitates students’ understanding that there are diverse ways of approaching morality and interaction in our contemporary world. Correspondingly, the underlying philosophy and orientation of this proposed pedagogy can also be adapted and used to teach other subjects where students need to learn and understand through discovering other ways of looking at and using the subject material.

This proposed pedagogy has been developed from the experience of teaching ethics to students who live on the U.S–Mexico border where one can feel the some of the tensionality inherent in the difference between US-Mexican values and tradition. Numerous examples about how these different values and traditions can influence one’s interactions and interpretations emerge in classroom discussions. A typical example is when the classroom discussion is centered on cultural ideas and approaches of the two cultures concerning whether I should put myself first or family first. Students living and growing up on the border report that they often have to negotiate between the moral value of the Anglo American culture (where I come first) and the Mexican or Hispanic tradition of placing family first. Each tradition has a moral lens that has its own implication for how one communicates and interacts with the world.
Further, this paper seeks to encourage students to talk about different ways of approaching ethics and how to interact with people who come from a similar cultural background but who have different views about ethical responsibility. The first step to encouraging dialogue is to assist students in developing their awareness of themselves, their relationships, the border community and the world at large. This proposed approach emphasizes that communication ethics is based on the philosophy that our culture is primarily shaped by the nature and quality of our communication interactions. How we communicate in turn is influenced by the world around us — social, political, economic, and other cultural factors. Rapid changing technologies, increasing global economy and the redefining of cultural boundaries are creating a world where there is more and more diversity in racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual backgrounds. Thus, “this increasingly complex and diverse world calls us to reconsider long standing assumptions about how, when, and with whom we interact” (Makau and Arnett, 1997, p.vii).

Pedagogically, this approach of promoting true dialogue is propelled by the basic concepts of mindfulness which is the practice or awareness of one’s self and others for assisting students’ efforts in broadening their own horizons of the world around them so that they may consider other ways of engaging their world. Encouraging students to look beyond themselves, their world view, and standpoints necessitates that students approach others with at least some degree of openness and a willingness to take advantage of those communication opportunities that serendipitously arise so that they can discover diverse ways of negotiating their world. Grounding pedagogy in being open to serendipity necessitates that teachers be flexible in their lesson plans in order to take advantage of students’ observations, opinions and discoveries that can lead to informative and lively ethical discussions. Students are asked to explore and become mindful of their own ideas of morality— what they consider to be right and wrong — and how their own ideas, traditions and values have been influenced by their culture, biography, religion, family values, education, and heritage. In this case, learning is propelled by students’ efforts to become more aware of and by their curiosity about different ideas.

Fundamentally, the proposed pedagogy of mindfulness and dialogue is driven by the Aristotelian foundations of living choices or a way of being. This way of ‘being’ or choosing to be open to others implies that students need to be sensitive to others’ viewpoints and be receptive to the dialogic possibilities that arise in the classroom. Dialogue that creates possibilities for new knowledge in the contexts of ethics and morality orients teaching from the perspective of dialogic ethics that have been articulated and expanded by Ronald C. Arnett, Mikhail M. Bakhtin, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, and John Stewart. Facilitating ethical dialogue from this pedagogical perspective is also driven by the notion of serendipity which calls for cultivating some degree of tolerance and appreciation for the pursuit and the evolution of new ideas that may seemingly come from nowhere but may help those engaged in making new exploration to discover things that they were not looking for. In this paper, the idea of ethical dialogue is driven by the notion of serendipity that foregrounds efforts in developing sensitivity for emergent ways of negotiating a world of diversity.

The first section of this paper engages students in the practice of mindfulness which is propelled by William Perry’s (1970) theory about the levels of ethical development in college students and how the hierarchical ethical development of college students implies a progression in how the student views and engages the world. Particular to this discussion are Perry’s ideas about the nine positions of students’ developmental moral thinking processes beginning with the intellectual position, where the student understands the world in more of a black and white or
dialectical forms, to his ninth position, where the student engages the world on multiple levels with each having embedded calls to commitment and personal responsibility.

William Perry’s (1970) theory describes ethical development in position 1 through 5 as a progression of college aged students’ orientation to the world as going from a strict polarized (black versus white) way of understanding of the world to a perception that all is relative and contextual. In position 5, the student progresses to a belief that some positions are correct for her or him (position 6), then engages the student in making an initial commitment and narrowing her/his options (position 7). And finally, in the last two positions (8& 9), Perry explains that the student realizes the implications of the commitments and how the world engages one in several directions at the same time and where one is called to make a number of commitments, each with her/his own ethical responsibilities. The last position is where the student lives her/his commitments by negotiating ethical decisions and interpretations as an unfolding activity through which she or he expresses life¹. Perry’s perspectives are driven by the notion that student’s understanding of a dialectical world rests on both what is similar and dissimilar in their world.

Another foundation of this pedagogical approach related to this work is the underlying premise of Sandra Harding’s and Julia T. Wood’s (1982) Standpoint Theory. The fundamental premise of these authors is that the social groups to which we belong shape what we know and what we communicate. Correspondingly, this pedagogical approach grounds teaching ethics in both engaging student’s in discovering their own standpoint and in the discovery of others’ standpoints through ethical dialogue. Students need to first understand that their standpoint is a place from which they view the world that determines what they focus on as well as what is obscured from them.

In light of this understanding, this paper argues that understanding one’s standpoint is not enough. Rather one’s standpoint needs to be immersed in the existing social communicative practices in order to broaden one’s standpoint horizon. Historicality or being informed by both conversations in the present and the past adds texture to the present conversation. This recognition enhances our understanding of how the past can inform present day conversations and assists those who are engaged in classroom dialogue to embed their teaching in ethical dialogue.

In the second part of this discussion, this paper explicates ideas about ethical dialogue grounded in the theories of Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, Mikhail M. Bakhtin and John Stewart. True authentic dialogue as approached by these scholars orients discussions about ethical issues in the classroom toward opening up new understandings for the students and teacher. Teaching ethics oriented by these dialogic perspectives are crucial because of the underlying belief that the ethical development of students in their college years is only possible through dialogue where the students encounter new understandings about themselves, others, and the emergent possibilities discovered through education. This education beginning in the classroom must be driven by the notion of communication ethics that requires the willingness and ability of our students from the borders of US-Mexico to listen to others without preconditions.

Communication Ethics Orientation

This paper’s theoretical and existential approaches are also grounded in communication ethics that follows the works of Josina Makau and Ronald C. Arnett’s (1997) whose vision of communication ethics is propelled by the works of Buber and Levinas. Arnett and Makau (1997) write:

Communication ethics in an age of diversity requires the will and ability to listen carefully to pursue and practice mutual respect, invite reciprocity and inclusiveness, and to live openly and responsibly with the dialectical tension inherent in commonality and difference. (p. x)

Communication ethics is intrinsically dialogic inviting all communication interactants to be engaged and embedded agents in responsive and responsible communication. Being open to others in dialogue embraces responsiveness and is fundamental to communication ethics. Moral human action is responsive human action (Arnett, Arneson, Bell, 2006; Friedman, 1994; Stewart, 1994) and thus any classroom activity that is not grounded in responsive and responsible communication fails to realize the serendipitous exploration that helps students to discover the significance of the pursuit of knowledge especially in engaging the other.

In the same vein, Robert Beckett posits that communication ethics fosters skills and moral frameworks that will work in multi-disciplinary settings. Coming from this perspective, the notion communication ethics recognizes that it is neither possible nor desirable to apply universal principles in today’s complex and uncertain world (Arnett, Arneson, Bell, 2006; Makau, 1997). In fact, Beckett emphasizes that “this approach maintains that all decision-making and communication is understood as having an ethical grounding which helps open a space for the evaluation of old and new ideas” (Beckett, 2003, p. 48).

Contemporary Communication Ethics

Contemporary communication ethic scholarship focused on the challenge of diversity necessitates that one is open to meeting, learning from and negotiating difference. One such approach to communication ethics is through the tenets of dialogue as proposed by scholars in agreement with the writings of Martin Buber and Alasdair MacIntyre. A philosophical home grounded in dialogic ethics is a postmodern approach, which does not assume that everyone relates to the same story or way of looking at the world, to communication ethics that “is responsive to a relational space that invites content and insight to emerge between persons” (Arnett et al, 2006, p. 80). It dissolves the notion of “anything goes” relativism. This dialogic ethics approach raises questions about how one can keep one’s eyes on the proverbial Kantian ‘ought’ for valuing social goods and the tension between the universal/local and emergent, particular/comprehensive, and how to frame a moral story that can be minimally accepted by people with diverse ways and cultural backgrounds in approaching ethics so that it initiates and invites dialogue that addresses common issues and concerns.

Further, the underlying assumption in dialogic ethics opens a horizon of possibilities for understanding diversity and different standpoints which has moral significance (Arnett et al, 2006). This notion is important for all of students especially for those with different cultural backgrounds. When dialoguing with others who have substantially different viewpoints, students need to be encouraged to develop their moral imagination (Benhabib, 1982) in order to be cognizant of...
difference. Developing “enlarged thinking” allows one to challenge previously held assumptions (Benhabib, 1982, pp. 9-13). Seyla Benhabib further maintains that “enlarged thinking” also facilitates moral insights. “Enlarged thinking” has moral ramifications as it encourages one to consider other’s standpoints and in the process of this consideration acknowledges other’s humanity and affective-emotional makeup (Benhabib, 1982, p. 159). The importance discovering others’ moral standpoints is crucial for many students who live and study on the US-Mexico border. By discovering what is similar and what is dissimilar, students can begin the process of enlarging their understanding of their own worldviews and the worldviews of others. Classroom activities recommended in this pedagogical approach emphasize the utility of the practice of mindfulness and ethical dialogue driven by a sense of serendipity for fostering student learning.

The first step towards this approach involves helping students to see that there are different ways to look at ethical situations and other ways of thinking may be markedly different from their own. Working towards this goal calls for two things to happen—first, helping the students move towards broadening their understanding of their own moral and ethical orientation; and second, creating a classroom climate that encourages students to be receptive to engaging different ideas and how they can find common ground so that they may address ethical and moral issues together. Pedagogically, this process is initiated through introducing students to some of the basic tenets of the practice of mindfulness.

**Engaging Students in the Practice of Mindfulness**

This pedagogical approach is advanced through old and new ideas concerning the practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness, according to Eastern philosophy is grounded in meditation or Vipassana (insight) – the practice of seeing clearly. It encourages a way of “being” that is ethically grounded in responsiveness and responsibility toward others. Being mindful therefore helps students to be aware of themselves, others, and the world around them. The activity of mindfulness, the art of moment-to-moment awareness, is not thinking, interpreting, or evaluating experiences but it is about opening up one’s awareness to that which is happening in and around oneself in the present moment.

Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, known as Bhante H., is a Sri Lankan monk from the Theravada branch of Buddhism. He explains in his book (1992), Mindfulness in Plain English that mindfulness is a non-egotistic alertness, a goal-less awareness, and an awareness of change. “Mindfulness is mirror-thought. It reflects only what is presently happening and exactly the way it is happening. There are no biases” (http://www.urbandharma.org/udharma4/mpe.html). This approach by Bhante H is important for students who enter our classrooms with a myopic view of the standpoint theory. It helps students to engage the moment and become aware of their surroundings that lead them to acknowledge other elements in their environment.

Further, the Buddhists way of practicing mindfulness texture contemporary issues and concerns through the practice of awareness—of the everyday implications of approaching the world in automatic, judgmental, and habitual ways. Contemporary issues linked with ideas concerning mindfulness are seen in the fields of social psychology, interpersonal communication, organizational communication, organizational studies, educational psychology, law, medicine, mediation, and business administration (Burgoon, Berger, and Waldrorn, 2000; Connelly, 2005; Deutsch-Horton and Horton, 2003; Fiol and O’Connor, 2004; Fisher, 2004; Hahn, 1994; Langer, 2 Shafir, R.Z. The Zen of Listening: Mindful communication in the Age of Distraction. 2nd ed. (Wheaton: the Theosophical Publishing House, 2003).
Pioneering observations about mindlessness in our contemporary milieu is social psychologist, Ellen Langer. Langer’s (1988) empirical studies began with collecting observations of mindlessness in geriatric patients where patients moved through their world in almost robotic like behavior. Mindlessness, Langer concludes, is when one is trapped by categories, acting through automatic behavior and/or a single perspective. From her observations, she defines mindfulness as: “a state of mind that results from drawing novel distinctions, examining information from new perspectives, and being sensitive to context. It [mindfulness] is a capacity to see any situation or environment from several perspectives” (Langer, 1988, p. 44).

Correspondingly, working with mindfulness as an organizational theory, C. Marlena Fiol and Edward O’Connor (2004) argue that mindfulness to mindlessness operates on a continuum from “1) category creation to category rigidity, 2) from openness to new information to automatic behaviors that exclude new information, and 3) from awareness of multiple perspectives to a fixation on a single point of view” (p. 1). Both individuals and organizations as a whole can express mindfulness in the same ways, although organizations differ in their capacity in achieving mindfulness because an organizations’ ability to encourage mindfulness as an organizational practice is also a function of the organization’s routine and history.

Mindfulness also has implications for education. In defining true learning as a product of mindfulness, students need to attend to and explore the world around them. When education is purely focused on rote learning and the regurgitation of facts, it does a disfavor to the students. Rather than assessing how much students have memorized on an exam students should be assessed on how much they are engaging information in the world. Mindfulness helps students to work toward understanding different perspectives. Therefore, Langer (1993) argues that “conditional instruction that respects variability and multiple frames for information would go a long way in leading us [teachers] in this direction” (p. 59).

This paper argues for introducing students to the basic tenet of mindfulness—the participant observer. Being a participant observer engages one to be focused on seeing things as they are from a non-judgmental, goal-less, and present time awareness. This practice can enhance the way one communicates and interprets everyday actions, thoughts, perceptions, and reactions. As a participant observer along with being aware and attentive to others, one needs to be cognizant on how the context of the situation, both present and past history, influences the interaction. Thus, the students’ burgeoning awareness opens up a space where true dialogue can emerge in the classroom through the engagement of different ideas.


Encouraging Students’ Learning through Ethical Dialogue

Becoming aware of one’s standpoint must be driven by a sense of ethical dialogue that opens students to a classroom context that is free and creative so that both the teacher and students can engage each other in a play that gradually reaches a crescendo of insightful appreciation of knowledge (Amankwah, 2008). Students and teachers in a performative communicative interaction facilitate the movement of the communicative process of exploration that evolves experiences of new ideas which in turn generates other new ideas, resulting in a dialectical tension within the dialogue that encourages learning from each other. This kind of experiential outcome is directed toward the inducement of human knowing and it challenges students to become aware that by engaging other students in an atmosphere that calls for ethical dialogue, each student learns to respect the opinions of other students. In fact, Kellet and Dalton posit that when people engage each other in a reflective questioning, it opens a broader horizon for dialogue and the pursuit of knowledge (Kellet & Dalton, 2001). These authors note that such a symbolic formation through dialogic experience in the classroom points to dialogue as a reflective questioning and a systemic inquiry through which dialectical tensions inherent in the pursuit of knowledge are positioned as both the means of analysis and the means of intervention (Kellet & Dalton, 2001). Further, the dialogical ethics directs those involved in the conversation to a relation of true contact between genuine persons, revealing presence, openness, mutuality, emergence, and voice (Buber, 1998).

In the words of Buber, notion of dialogue is the “between the extremes on the narrow ridge” (Buber). The dialogue on the ‘narrow ridge’ evokes a crisis that gradually draws the participants together in their search for mutual understanding, respect for opinions and confirmation and disconfirmation of one another (Anderson et al.). Students, therefore, must be encouraged to participate in such a conversation to learn to accept others’ opinions and engage them in serious dialogue guided by respect and mutual understanding so that they can pursue the conversation to discover new ideas. Buber notes that the space of the between points to presence that is driven by an ethic of not simply the physical presence but being genuinely and fully engaged in the evolving interaction which Emmanuel Levinas (1998) terms as the “saying.”

Presence, according to Buber (1998), is a primal ground for dialogue. In his dialogical ethics, Buber emphasizes the significance of presence as pointing to openness that calls for the recognition and acceptance of the genuine being of the other person, revealing the fundamental difference existing between the participants (Buber, 1998). All students, those from multi-cultural backgrounds and those from homogenous cultural backgrounds, must be helped to embrace difference and be led to acknowledge such difference is healthy for conversation. The genuineness of “being” of the other can only mature in the dialogical process when the participants accept and acknowledge each other with mutual respect and openness. Buber emphasizes in this context that dialogical ethic points to the notion of the between which calls for mutuality in the relation. The mutuality

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helps the participants to move away from individual’s narcissistic impressions to an understanding and recognition of the existence of the other. This notion propels the idea of emergence, that is, students come to realize that the outcomes of the dialogue are not predetermined by any of the participants engaged in the dialogue.

Further, Buber (1975) points us to the ground of the between as shaping and driving the dialogue while placing the responsibility of the dialogue on the participants. In this sphere of the between, students learn the process of the dialogue as assuming an unending dynamism that brings into the dialogue changeability, transformation, and metamorphosis. Additionally, the sphere of the between empowers voice which attains a multivocal stance in the conversation while dispelling univocal relation (Stewart & Zediker, 2000).

David Berlo (1960) also helped to free the notion of dialogue from its restraints and notes that dialogue is a process,11 an active process that flows among persons, context and topic. Cultural differences are healthy because they propel divergent views. It establishes and deepens human relations and Buber emphasizes in this context that “Man can become whole not in virtue of a relation to himself but only in virtue of a relation to another self.12”

Further, Buber notes:

The human world is today, as never before, split into two camps, each of which understands the other as the embodiment of truth... . . .Each side has assumed monopoly of the sunlight and has plunged it into antagonist night, and each side demands that you decide between day and night. . . . Expressed in modern terminology, he believes that he has ideas, his opponent only ideologies. This obsession feeds the mistrust that incites the two camps.13

Trust-building among diverse communication interactants is essential for true dialogue and learning.

Correspondingly, Ronald C. Arnett calls for continuing conversation textured by Buber’s dialogic philosophy where dialogue is driven by the notion of “unity of contraries” that can encourage one to act courageously and still respond and communicate even if one is faced by opposing ideas (Arnett, 2004, p.76). The call to courage includes having the desired courage to state and maintain a position and the courage to change a position when responsibly appropriate. Many of students seem to bypass this notion of courage by maintaining an absolute standpoint—where I am right and you are wrong. Through different communication activities designed to enhance and facilitate students’ dialogical engagement, students can learn listen to and respond to other students’ point of view. Again, Buber underscores this dialogical engagement by noting that questions arising during conversations should be understood as moments of tension between difference and similarity and closeness and distance. Engaging in dialogue with an existential focus on the between therefore provides an opportunity for new and emerging understandings (Wood, 1997) and is a practical postmodern approach to ethics that enhances competence and moral decision-making for students and especially in the classroom environment. In contrast, individualistic and competitive agendas


13 Buber, 1967a, p.306-307
which usually characterize students from a multi-cultural heritage undermine this call to responsibility (Makau, 1997). Moral human action is responsive human action (Stewart, 1997).

Embracing rather than resolving the tension between diversity and commonality is the most likely way to grow relationships (Wood, 1997) among students and teachers of varied cultural backgrounds because it fosters maturity and enhances the dialogic wisdom needed to understand and appreciate other’s standpoint. Finally, students should understand that along with developing sensitivities to negotiating difference and recognizing opportunities to further the conversation, they need to be sensitive to how serendipity plays into the historical moment and communication interaction.

**Serendipitous Ethical Dialogue**

What is serendipity? The word originally comes from Julius H. Comroe, a biomedical researcher (http://www.simonsingh.net/What_is_Serendipity.html). Most dictionary compliers prefer the following definition: Serendipity – a natural gift for making useful discoveries quite by accident. The word has its roots in “The Three Princes of Serendip”, a Persian story about three princes who had the knack of discovering things quite by chance. The Three Princes of Serendip” was published in Europe in 1557 by a Venetian, Michele Tramezzino, and eventually was translated into other languages. Horace Walpole, a British statesman, read the story as a child, and later coined the word serendipity in a letter dated January 28, 1754, sent to Horace Mann (envoy to Florence). Walpole wrote about learning some news quite by chance, and stated that “this discovery, indeed, is almost of that kind which I call Serendipity, a very expressive word. He explained that this name was part of the title of a “silly fairy tale, called The Three Princes of Serendip; as their highnesses traveled, they were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of...” (http://www.simonsingh.net/What_is_Serendipity.html).

This notion of serendipity propels discovery of new ideas in the classroom where teacher-student exploration focuses on constant searching for new knowledge. Exploration for new ideas may at times take both teacher and students on another path than they originally set out on. In the context of this paper, serendipitous ethical dialogue is characterized by the notion of sensitivity and sensibility which involves openness to different unexpected discoveries of new evolving perspectives that stimulate the search for common ground despite the frustrations usually inherent in dialogue. These unexpected discoveries point to Buber’s notion of the ‘between,’ Levinas’ understanding of the ‘other’, Bakhtin’s opinion of answerability, and practice of mindfulness in which the search and discovery are characterized by a sense of respect, sensitivity, and rhetorical interruptions grounded in presence, openness, mutuality, emergence, voice, and face. Both teacher and students journey through the thickets of academic exploration cultural understanding often marked by confusion and misunderstanding. Both set the pace of the dialogical rhythm accompanied by a desire for unexpected discovery of knowledge that may drive both their interest and expectations. This character of interaction of teacher and students demands openness, mutuality, emergence of new ideas (Buber, 1955), multivocal interaction (Bakhtin, 1981) and respect for the face of the Other (Levinas, 1988).

The interaction within the search for new understandings of the conversation invites both vertical (teacher-to-student) and horizontal (student-to-student) axiomatic interaction so that both teacher and students are capable of pulling together their energies for the search of mutual acceptance and understanding of cultural norms. In light of this new understanding, John Amankwah, in Dialogue: The Church and the Voice of the Other has argued:
In both secular and religious dialogue, the encounter divulges a mid-point on the vertical and horizontal axis where the ethical subjectivity in the accusative stands before the other in responsibility. It is a point on the narrow ridge where the dialogue begins, and where the search for authenticity of being leads to a meaningful significance of responsibility embedded and discovered through service to the other – I am my brother’s keeper. (Buber)\(^{14}\)

Contextually, both the teacher and students accept the responsibility of teaching and learning through dialogue marked by respect for each other and respect for everyone’s opinions. Because responsibility in dialogue is driven by a sense of the expected and the unexpected. Further, discoveries in the sphere of academic exploration where the vertical and horizontal axis offer an interplay of human activity is embedded in the metaphor of the ‘between’ as Buber has argues (Buber, 1998).

Coming from an anthropological school of thought, Buber situates his understanding of man and his interaction within an ontological perspective grounded in concrete historical moment that is not estranged from life’s events that define our experiences.\(^{15}\) Fundamentally, the ontological experiences of students from diverse cultural backgrounds also define for them the cultural systems inherent in their communicative perceptions which are made of myths, stories, and eventually textured as narrative that guides their interactions in the classroom.

Thus, serendipitous ethical dialogue in the classroom must be cast in an interpretive task of pursuing the aliveness of human experience. As teachers, our search for different human experiences of our students must be guided by the notion of “Interhuman” so that the communication among students can be transparent and ethical in all dimensions. In this context, Levinas’s notion of “standing accused” before the other where the cry of ethical revolt is heard as a call to responsibility to reach out to the other is heard and is defined in ontological terms. The meeting of the two worlds-ethical transcendence and the ontological between (the two axis of vertical and horizontal defining the fields of Levinas and Buber) become meaningful in the serendipitous experience because they drive the search for knowledge for both teacher and student and remind them of the dignity that propels the expected ethical response. The ethical transcendent and the ontological “between” further facilitate “the cacophony of conversational reverberation.”\(^{16}\) It is therefore also important that students with different cultural backgrounds be helped to come to terms with the fact that their pursuit of knowledge is embedded in the desire to learn to engage others in conversations and discussions so that they can open themselves to numerous perspectives so that they can make the right judgment. Ethical dialogue calls for openness and it involves both centripetal (moving towards) and centrifugal (moving away) dimensions that permeate the indeterminate exchange that takes place in conversations and discussions among students and often go unnoticed. The


inherent dialectic in many of the conversations between students of different cultural backgrounds, or similar cultural backgrounds as in the case of the US-Mexico border students, calls for attention to Bakhtin’s metaphor of answerability that reminds one of the responsibility to respond to the other and must be grounded in presence, openness, mutuality, emergence, and voice that at times cannot be predictive but yet invites rhetorical interruptions, an occurrence in the communication that causes one to pause and consider other ideas. The classroom can be a testing ground for rhetorically interrupting the climate of sameness by discovering that even though students’ may have similar cultural backgrounds this is where the similarity may end which in turns invites unexpected conversations about how interpretations can vary. Rhetorically, these new considerations are born of being open to serendipity. Bakhtin’s (1981) dialogical approach has implications for both on site learning and distance education particularly in these times of online courses and interactive discussion groups. Technology gives both students and teachers opportunity to participate in discussions through the educational institution’s web system. Whether students are participating in discussion groups online or in the classroom, Bakhtin and Buber’s approaches to dialogue as proposed here serve as a supporting paradigm that propels ethical dialogue where one meets the other in the between and answers the call to responsibility to oneself and the other. This pedagogy imports this framework into the classroom.

**Teaching Pedagogy Propelled by Mindfulness and Serendipitous Dialogue**

In a mindful, serendipitous approach to pedagogy, class assignments are designed to facilitate the students’ practice of mindfulness and encourage ethical dialogue that oftentimes explores and discovers unexpected horizons. The practice of mindfulness facilitates awareness of one’s self and the world. Mindfulness also helps students how understand different ethical philosophies and moral development theories can apply to everyday life. Journaling about the application of different ethical theories or ideas in everyday life can lead students to look at things that they may not have normally noticed or thought about. Journaling, then, as an outcome of mindful practices, then sets the stage for classroom discussions so that students can encounter others’ experiences and ideas in how presented philosophies and theories can be or may not be applicable to our contemporary world. Further, this pedagogical approach also encourages students not only to understand others but also to work in order to understand themselves better through engagement with others.

Class assignments are meant to encourage self-reflective critical thinking and explorations of others’ world views through the practice of mindfulness and serendipitous ethical dialogue. The student learning outcomes for this pedagogy are:

1. Students will be able to discuss in a serious way the moral and ethical implications of communication practices.
2. Students will be able to recognize how a diversity of perspectives impact communication and ethical viewpoints.
3. Students will be able to identify at least three major philosophical ethical theories and be able to apply insights drawn from history and philosophy to reflect critically on ethical issues in contemporary communication.

These outcomes are assessed through student papers, discussions, final presentations, and exams. Students are graded in how deeply they engage the different ethical philosophies and orientations for understanding diverse orientations and interpretations. Fundamental to this approach is the recognition that students will be at different maturity levels and capabilities of understanding; therefore, it is important to assess each student’s own level of progression of
understanding and engagement of the course material. Finally, student learning outcomes are assessed through their own self reports at the end of the course when they are asked to explain their new understandings of different ethical philosophies and orientations and how they can be applied to their everyday lives or contemporary problems; and their accounts of what they have learned about their own standpoint and how that impacts their interpretations of ethical situations in their life.

Students are introduced to the practice of mindfulness throughout the semester in layers of increasing depth. First, the step is to encourage students to notice and be aware of that what surrounds them. More often than not students’ first attempts involve reports in how they become more aware of their physical world—the different sights and sounds in their everyday routines. As the semester progresses, the pedagogical use of the practice of mindfulness is steered more towards being aware of the categories of judgment and notion of the participant observer. Looking at the world as a participant observer focuses on seeing things as they are from a non-judgmental, goal-less, and present time awareness. As a participant observer students are taught to the focus is on what is happening rather than their ego’s wants, needs, and desires. Moving their ego aside, students can start to see how they communicate and interpret everyday actions, thoughts, and perceptions. Enhanced awareness also brings to light different potentialities of choices and outcomes inherent in negotiating life. This discovery of choices and outcomes may lead to more enhanced serendipitous ethical dialogue in the classroom.

The first assignment, My Standpoint Paper, begins the initiative of self-discovery. In this assignment students write a standpoint paper detailing their ethical commitments and analyze their ethical responsibilities in light of their background- culture, ethnicity, socialization, and personal biography. In short, students are to examine what, why, and how they developed their beliefs. How deeply students engage this assignment depends on many different factors including their maturity level, depth of interest, and willingness to disclose and/or engage in self-reflection. More often than not, students’ insights in their papers are quite astute and deeply thoughtful.

In addition, students are also required to write several Think Papers on specific chapters in the course texts. These Think Papers are two pages long. The first page is a review and discussion of the author(s) major points, metaphors, and thesis and in the second page students are to discuss how these ideas may be applied to everyday life. Are these ideas helpful when looking at contemporary debate? Are these ideas connected to everyday life? How? For example, after reading Sisela Bok’s essay on lying always incites a lively discussion concerning white lies. The students’ Hispanic cultural influence often raises questions about the dialectic of lying in order to save someone’s feelings, stave off an argument, or to show respect and the responsibility of telling the truth. Thus, their cultural background foregrounds relationships and saving face. Tough questions are then discussed about personal responsibility and when lying could be justified. Some students comment in their self reports that through the classroom discussions and their own realizations that they have come to realize how they have developed their ideas about lying and what that means on both a personal level and societal level.

In sum, this pedagogical approach focuses on ways that facilitate students’ efforts in opening up awareness of their selves and others in such a way that is applicable to ethical serendipitous classroom dialogue. Fundamentally, this means that the teacher needs to lead and be willing to be lead through the hills and valleys of discourse.
Conclusion

This paper advances pedagogy for teaching communication ethics that facilitates undergraduate students’ efforts to expand their understandings beyond their own standpoints so that they may see diverse ways of approaching and interacting in our contemporary world. Teachers can promote practice of mindfulness, and develop an awareness of the moral implications of Buber’s dialogic philosophy, Levinas’ notion of respect for the other, and readiness to engage each other in an unending interaction, driven by a sense of serendipity.

The practice of mindfulness is used to help students understand the implications of standpoint theory in communication ethics. Makau (1997) and Wood (1993) showed how standpoint theory “provides a useful starting point for discussion of diversity and communicative ethics” (Makau, p. 53). Paul Reis (2000) explains that it is important to teach ethics through helping students recognize their own ground—their own voice. He notes:

By asking students to recognize and understand their own beliefs, values, attitudes, and behavior, we were to interpret and find meaning in their own lived experience (and to find their own voice, their own consciousness). By recognizing who they are, and where their current ethical beliefs come from, students will be taking the first step toward autonomous decision making. Other important steps in that direction include being aware of the constant tension between individual agency and societal structure (our actions are limited by cultural, economic, and social constraints) and being reasonably informed about the philosophical underpinnings of different ethical theories. (Reis, p. 199-200)

In light of the discussion here, this paper argues for a similar perspective that encouraging students to find their own ground is a necessary part of teaching communication ethics. Similarly, the pedagogical approach proposed by this paper is driven by the practice of mindfulness and ethical dialogue as a seed to foster serendipity in the classroom. A starting place for communication ethics discussion is through the students’ lived experiences and observations thus encouraging students to engage learned concepts and apply them to their everyday experience. The goal is to help students’ understandings—first of all, to view ethics as something that is not just something that dead guys, movies, and TV shows talk about but is a way of looking at the world that is fundamental to their understanding of life, and—second, that ethics and morality is about openness, reciprocity, inclusiveness, truthfulness, authenticity, respectful dialogue, and empowerment. This approach differs from those courses where students are asked to objectively analyze hypothetical ethical cases in detached theoretical discussions. Instead, this pedagogy facilitates both the teacher and her or his students to engage in the practice of mindfulness, dialogue, and awareness of serendipity that assists an outcomes-based model where students learn to analyze different ethical scenarios by considering all the different viewpoints. At the same time, this pedagogy helps students to recognize that teacher and students are still standing on their own philosophical ground or coming from their own subjective standpoint.

The specific assignments embodied in the search for new knowledge through serendipity include open and frequent discussion with students to write out instances of communication interactions that they have observed. The point is to invite students to be more mindful of what is
going on around them and how they interact with the world. And because we live in an incentive culture, these exercises are unannounced and students receive extra credit points. To help student’s acuity for practicing mindfulness, it is important to alert students to pay attention to their surroundings and the way they interact with others and the ways others interact with them. When students become more cognizant about how they can trudge unreflectively through life and how many things escape their notice, they can become more alert to the historical moment. The first step is to introduce students to the importance of the practice of mindfulness—listening to themselves, others, and the call for moral actions. Then with their new found insights, students can be invited to talk about how they can ethically contribute to the chain of evolving events around them. They can then build on their discoveries as they begin to engage knowledge with their fellow students in an ethical manner. The idea is to help students to be more cognizant of how we can habitually act and react and how other’s respond and how communication can also be reflective and unreflective and orthopraxis and orthodox.

In the same way, the creative force of dialogue encouraged by the classroom climate of serendipity can open up understandings for both teacher and student. Integral to this paradigm for teaching communication ethics is that students may find themselves being uncomfortable. Self-exploration and mindfulness is neither a panacea nor entrance into a Disney-like world. Most often tensions escalate with the realizations that this is not a black and white world. Nor is it easy to resolve some situations that have real moral consequences. Moving students from Perry’s black and white (position 1) orientation to commitments explored and lived (position 8 & 9) is a personal process where there is no easy paved road but perhaps is more like exploring a remote Amazon jungle with one encountering both fright and delight. Finally, mindfulness and openness to serendipity, as a way of being, assists one’s journey through life with others.
Reference


